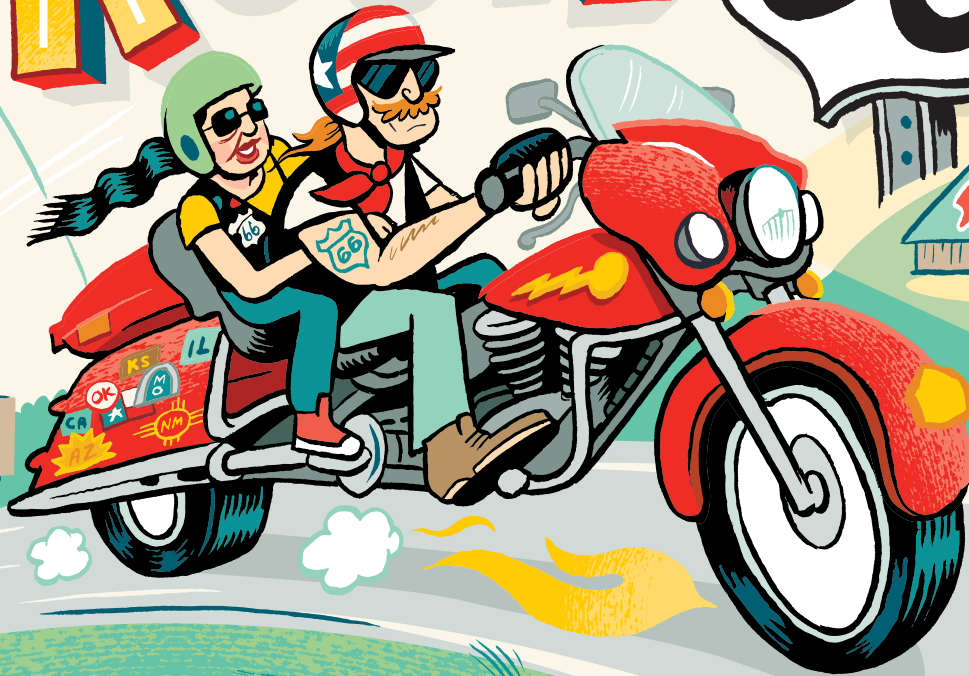


Illinois Country Living

100 YEARS of ROUTE



 Association of Illinois
Electric Cooperatives

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PRAIRIE TABLE
A sweet slice of
Americana

SUPPORT LOCAL
Sirup, not syrup

FINEST COOKING
The All-American
hot dog

 **CO-OP
NEWS**

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Illinois Country Living

MAY 2026

VOLUME 84, NO. 1

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28 A sweet slice of Americana on the Mother Road

This month, PRAIRIE TABLE visits Ariston Cafe in Litchfield.



ILLUSTRATION COURTESY OF DAN ZETTWOCH



PHOTO COURTESY OF FUNKS GROVE



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ILLUSTRATION COURTESY OF DAN ZETTWOCH



PHOTO COURTESY OF BARB FOWLER

The modern substation

Keeping communities powered

ELECTRIC SUBSTATIONS SIT AT the center of power grids and are essential to keeping the lights on in our communities. You've seen them — those fenced-in areas filled with metal structures, wires and heavy equipment. They may not look flashy, but they're one of the most important behind-the-scenes components of the grid.

Substations take power from high-voltage transmission lines and convert it to the lower voltages that get distributed through the power lines you see every day. These lines provide power to your home, farm or business. Every light switch you flip and every device you charge depend on a substation doing its job without interruption. These facilities work quietly in the background, yet they shape the comforts of daily life. Illinois' electric co-ops work 24/7 to maintain and improve these substations.

Substations began as simple switching points that handled basic voltage changes. Early designs used bulky equipment and manual controls. As communities grew, electric demand on the grid grew with them.

Today's substations utilize advanced sensors, automated controls and digital communication systems, allowing cooperatives to better manage the grid. These tools help co-ops respond faster to out-

ages, monitor equipment health and manage energy with more precision.

A modern substation protects your community from disruption. It isolates problems, keeps dangerous faults from spreading and supports important line equipment across long distances. When a substation faces a major issue, such as a storm or wildlife contact, the impact is immediate:

Communities lose power. These events remind us how central substations are to modern life.

Communities add new homes, businesses, irrigation systems and commercial buildings every year. Each addition increases the load on the grid. That's why co-ops build new substations and upgrade older ones to keep pace with the growth.

Modern substation designs use equipment that requires less strenuous maintenance while improving system protection. Smart-enabled protection devices reduce the time needed to identify and isolate faults. These advanced monitoring tools give co-ops better visibility into real-time grid conditions.

For the surrounding community, these investments lead to stronger service and reliability. You experience fewer outages. Your farm or business gains resiliency. Your home appliances run on steadier voltage.

Modern substations also help cooperatives manage costs. Instead of building miles of new line, a well-placed substation can support growing neighborhoods or rural industries with less construction and lower long-term investment.

Substations also support the changing energy landscape. Renewable energy systems, electric vehicles and electrified commercial and industrial operations need modern control points. Modern substations allow co-ops to integrate these resources without sacrificing reliability. They help manage energy across widespread areas and keep the grid balanced during peak conditions.

Substations serve as the quiet backbone of the electric system. When they operate well, communities thrive. When they falter, everything from daily chores to essential services are impacted. Electric cooperatives will continue to invest in these facilities to support safe, reliable and affordable service for every member in every community they serve. 💡



Jeffrey Groenewold writes on consumer and cooperative affairs for the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association, the national trade association representing more than 900 local electric cooperatives.

Illinois Country Living is a monthly publication serving the communications needs of the locally owned, not-for-profit electric cooperatives of Illinois. With a circulation of more than 200,000, the magazine informs cooperative consumer-members about issues affecting their electric cooperative and the quality of life in rural Illinois.

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Eye Doctor Helps Illinois Legally Blind To See

High Technology For Low Vision Patients Allows Many To Drive Again



For many patients with macular degeneration and other vision-related conditions, the loss of central visual detail also signals the end to one of the last bastions of independence: driving. A Mascoutah optometrist, Dr. Marianne McDaniel, is using miniaturized telescopes that are mounted in glasses to help people who have lost vision from macular degeneration and other eye conditions.

"Some of my patients consider me the last stop for people who have vision loss," said Dr. McDaniel, one of only a few doctors in the world who specialize in fitting bioptic telescopes to help those who have lost vision due to macular degeneration, diabetic retinopathy, and other debilitating eye diseases.

Imagine a pair of glasses that can improve your vision enough to change your life. If you're a low vision patient, you've probably not only imagined them, but have been searching for

them. Bioptic telescopes may be the breakthrough in optical technology that will give you the independence you've been looking for. Patients with vision in the 20/200 range can many times be improved to 20/50 or better.

Macular degeneration is the leading cause of blindness and vision loss in people over 50. Despite this, most adults are not familiar with the



A scene as it might be viewed by a person with age-related macular degeneration.

condition. As many as 25% of those over the age of 50 have some degree of macular degeneration. The macula is only one small part of the retina; however, it is the most sensitive and gives us sharp central vision. When it degenerates, macular degeneration leaves a blind spot right in the center of vision, making it difficult or impossible to recognize faces, read a book, or pass the driver's vision test.

Nine out of 10 people who have macular degeneration have the dry form. New research suggests vitamins can help. The British medical journal BMC Ophthalmology recently reported that 56% of patients treated with a high-dose combination of vitamins experienced improved vision after six months.

While age is the most significant risk factor for developing the disease, heredity, smoking, cardiovascular disease, and high blood pressure have also been identified as risk factors.

Macular degeneration accounts for 90% of new legal blindness in the U.S. While there is currently no cure, promising research is being done on many fronts. "My job is to figure out everything and anything possible to keep a person functioning, especially driving," says Dr. McDaniel.

"Bioptic telescopes can cost over \$2,000," said Dr. McDaniel, "especially if we build them with an automatic sunglass."

"The major benefit of the bioptic telescope is that the lens automatically focuses on whatever you're looking at," said Dr. McDaniel. "It's like a self-focusing camera, but much more precise."

To learn more about bioptic telescopes or to schedule a consultation, give Dr. McDaniel a call. You can also visit our websites.

www.mascoutaheyecare.com

1-618-566-8899

Office located in Mascoutah, Illinois
Marianne McDaniel, O.D.

MEMORIAL DAY

REMEMBER AND HONOR

Memorial Day is a time to pause and remember the brave men and women who made the ultimate sacrifice while serving our country. Their courage and dedication helped secure the freedoms we enjoy every day.

As a member-owned electric cooperative, we are proud to serve a community built on those same values of service, sacrifice and commitment to one another. This Memorial Day, we encourage our members to take a moment to reflect, honor our fallen heroes, and spend time with loved ones.

From all of us at your electric cooperative, we wish you a safe and meaningful Memorial Day.



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MAY CHECKLIST

Simple summer savings

Adjust your thermostat.



Save energy by raising your thermostat a few degrees. Even a small adjustment can reduce cooling costs without sacrificing comfort.



Check the air filter.

A clean air filter helps your system run more efficiently and keeps cool air flowing. Check your filter monthly during the summer and replace it when it's dirty.

Think small when cooking.



Use smaller appliances, like slow cookers or air fryers, instead of the oven on hot days. Cooking indoors can heat up your home, making your air conditioner work harder.



Adjust the curtains.

Close blinds or curtains during

the hottest part of the day to keep the sun from heating your home. This simple step can help your air conditioner work less, which saves energy.



Pictured counterclockwise from top: State Representative Patrick Windhorst, State Senator Terri Bryant, State Senator Steve McClure and State Representative C. D. Davidsmeyer talking with co-op students during Youth Day.

Co-op students meet Illinois lawmakers

Future Illinois leaders got a front-row seat to government in action on March 25 as 168 students sponsored by 24 electric and telephone cooperatives across the state traveled to Springfield for Youth Day.

“The annual event gives students an opportunity to engage with elected officials, explore the State Capitol and learn how cooperative principles connect with leadership and public service,” said Brooke Gross, member services manager at the Association of Illinois Electric Cooperatives and facilitator of its youth programs. “Co-ops are committed not only to providing reliable service but also to investing in future generations.”

Youth Day is designed to introduce young leaders to state government and the cooperative

principles that serve their communities. Students met with their own elected officials to experience the workings of state government firsthand.

“When I think of politicians, I think big and scary people,” said Qynlin Brown, a student who was sponsored by Clay Electric Co-operative. “But I talked to Senator Jason Plummer, and he was really nice. He was very friendly, and he was open to all of our questions and [about] his life experiences. He gave us great advice.”

In addition, students met Illinois State Treasurer Michael Frerichs. He shared his journey from a small town in Illinois to his current role, emphasizing the importance of finding interesting and challenging opportunities. He encouraged the students to pursue their passions, participate and become lifelong learners.

Continued on page 8

Sudoku

by Myles Mellor and Susan Flanagan

To solve the puzzle, each row, column and box must contain each of the numbers 1 to 9. Level: Medium

Solution on page 33.

1		2		9		7		
		8		7		5	2	1
			2		4		9	
			4					2
	7						5	
8					9			
	6		1		7			
9	8	3		4		6		
		1		8		4		5

"Youth Day" continued from page 7



ILLINOIS TRIVIA CHALLENGE



It's time to test your knowledge with a new Illinois Trivia Challenge! This month, we are focusing on Route 66.

- A quirky roadside attraction in Atlanta features a giant Paul Bunyan statue holding what food?
 - An ice cream cone
 - A hot dog
 - A donut
- Which Illinois Route 66 museum city is famous for having more than 20 large outdoor murals celebrating the road?
 - Pontiac
 - Normal
 - Joliet
- The Route 66 Sky View Drive-In, one of the oldest operating drive-ins, is in which Illinois city?
 - Litchfield
 - Carlinville
 - Staunton
- What massive roadside structure in Collinsville is a National Historic Landmark along Route 66?
 - World's Largest Milk Bottle
 - World's Largest Catsup Bottle
 - Giant Soda Can Tower

Answers are on page 33.



Top: The group of 168 students attending Youth Day pose in front of the State Capitol. Bottom left: State Representative Travis Weaver meets co-op students in his district. Bottom right: Students representing Corn Belt Energy Corporation enjoying the Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum.

They also met Micah Anderson, the 2025-26 Illinois Youth Leadership Council representative, who was sponsored by Adams Telephone Co-Operative for the 2025 Youth Day and Youth Tour in Washington, D.C. He said that representing Illinois has been one of the most fulfilling things he's done in his life.

"Throughout the year, I've grown in many ways that I could have never imagined," Anderson said. "I never thought that I would be able to see myself as a leader. ... I'm a testament to the growth that you can undergo if you take advantage of the opportunities that are placed in front of you. I challenge you all to do the same."

After lunch, several students had the opportunity to visit the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and

Museum. "The [museum] was the coolest experience," said Kasen Humke, who was sponsored by Adams Electric Cooperative. "We got to see all kinds of stuff about the Civil War, about Lincoln's assassination, and just about his life, and how he went from a small boy all the way to [the] President of the United States who led us through one of the hardest times in our country's history."

At the end of the day, attendees were interviewed for the chance to participate in Youth Tour, an annual trip to Washington, D.C., also sponsored by Illinois electric and telephone cooperatives. This year's trip will be held June 15-22. Follow along on their journey by going to facebook.com/ILYouthTour.

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Where is it?

The winners of the March hidden object contest were Susan Groves of Coles-Moultrie Electric Cooperative and Brett Mapel of Corn Belt Energy Corporation. Congratulations! Your ICL campfire mugs have been sent.

The ladybug hidden in the April 2026 issue was on page 12 in the Datebook section. Winners' names will be drawn, and they will be notified. Visit Illinois Country Living on Facebook after each month's deadline for a closeup of the object's location and winners' names.

It's time for a new hidden object search. To celebrate Route 66's 100th anniversary, be on the lookout for a camera, a tool necessary for photo ops along the route. The symbol is pictured above. It can vary in size and will not be hidden on this page, a lettered page or in an ad.

Entries must include your name, address, name of your electric co-op (nonmembers are also eligible), and the page number and location of the symbol. Visit icl.coop/hiddenobject and fill out the entry form (also found under Contact Us on the website) or mail a postcard or letter to Illinois Country Living, Hidden Objects, 6460 S. 6th St. Frontage Road East, Springfield, IL 62712. We will NOT accept entries via phone call or email.

All entries must be received by the 25th of the publication month. Only one entry is allowed per household every month. If multiple entries per household are submitted, only the first will be considered. Winners' names and the symbol's location will be published in each month's issue of Illinois Country Living. 📍



PHOTO COURTESY OF NRECA

Bolstering power transmission

The electric grid needs our help. Be it from new industrial complexes, data centers to serve all things AI, more gaming and electrification at home to electric vehicles, today's energy demand requires more power than ever before.

To keep up, new transmission equipment must be built, and existing transmission lines must be upgraded with the latest technology to move larger amounts of electricity, improve reliability and withstand Mother Nature. Transmission equipment is essential in moving large amounts of electricity from where power is produced to the communities rural electric co-ops serve.

Each year, thousands of power lines and poles are destroyed by more extreme weather, from derechos to icy blizzards. Historic winter storms like Uri and Fern seem to be making themselves at home in the South. The good news is that electric co-ops are completing transmission builds and breaking ground on new ones.

Generation and transmission co-ops that deliver wholesale power to electric co-ops are doing their part to reinforce regional transmission backbones with stronger poles and power lines. They are also developing projects to reach even the most remote wind, solar and other energy resources to power the grid.

But building new transmission takes a lot of time. Many years in fact. That's not because of the construction itself but the painstaking process for gaining approvals from state and federal agencies.

Yet, Mary Ann Ralls, senior director and regulatory counsel for the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association (NRECA), said, "Electric co-ops are successfully demonstrating that their proposed facilities are necessary to relieve regional congestion and enhance system reliability."

The public and owners of property where power lines will be hoisted to serve consumers also

have a say when it comes to siting transmission and allowing projects to go forward. That's where electric co-ops' member relations really shine.

It's not unusual for co-ops to go beyond the prescribed number of public hearings on a proposed transmission project and to meet concerned members where they are. That includes rotatory clubs or even one-on-one visits.

Electric co-ops exist to serve their members with safe, affordable and reliable electricity. Their ability to build strong ties with the communities they serve can go a long way when the need arises for critical infrastructure.

With their members in mind, co-ops seek out the most efficient ways to build transmission. For example, they upgrade lines in existing property rights-of-way and use the most durable technologies and equipment to keep costs in check and sustain reliability well into the future.

Increased power line capacity will reduce costs associated with transmission congestion, which makes moving energy across the grid particularly expensive. This in turn will help keep your monthly bill lower.

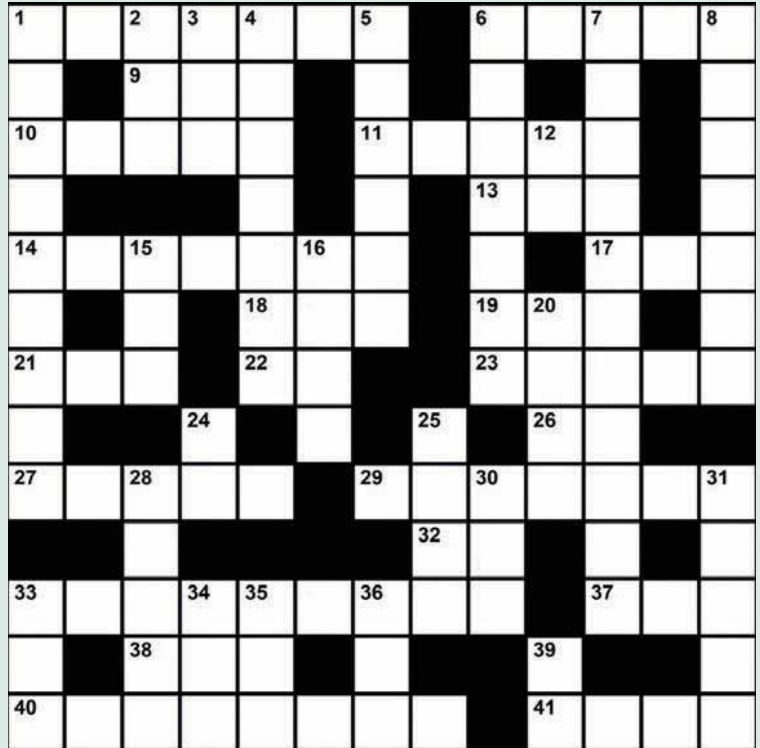
When co-ops can beef up power lines, economic benefits can be felt in the community, too. Rural areas with modern, high-voltage transmission are attractive to large job-creating businesses. Local employment and small business also experience upticks. For co-ops, taking on these complex projects comes down to serving their members.

"Electric co-ops have a long history of serving their members, and that commitment is driving their work to develop new transmission capacity to meet the nation's rising electricity demand," said Patti Metro, NRECA's senior grid operations and reliability director. 📍

Cathy Cash, NRECA

Across

- 1 Essential Mother's Day gifts
 6 Crew ____: fashionable wear over the feet
 9 Small green vegetable
 10 Daisy-like flower
 11 Mediterranean fruit used for EVOO
 13 Stretch out
 14 Cabernet or Pinot, 2 words
 17 Relaxation retreat
 18 Neither's partner
 19 Latish lunchtime
 21 Catch
 22 Proceed
 23 Neighborhoods, informally
 26 Start!
 27 White wading bird
 29 Therapeutic rubdown
 32 Leonardo __ Vinci
 33 Where a mom can keep all her cooking secrets, 2 words
 37 Owing
 38 Night before
 40 Cleansing product for the shower, 2 words
 41 Sweet fruit spreads
- 6 English blue cheese
 7 Tray with a dairy spread on it
 8 Summer footwear
 12 Roman numeral six
 15 Light touch
 16 Twelve o'clock
 20 Old horses
 24 Exist
 25 Woodworking groove
 28 Put through a sieve
 30 Mellow jazz instrument, abbr.
 31 Decorative pitchers
 33 Massage action
 34 Climbing vine
 35 Church bench
 36 Public transport vehicle
 39 Breakfast drink, briefly



Solution on page 33.

Down

- 1 Pleasant scent
 2 Choose
 3 Tiny
 4 Pierced jewelry
 5 Bathroom fixture with a head

DOWNED POWER LINE and Vehicle Safety

In an accident involving a power line:

- 1. Stay Inside the Vehicle:** The ground may be energized.
- 2. Call 9-1-1:** Report downed or damaged lines.
- 3. Warn Others:** Tell bystanders to stay away.
- 4. Wait for Utility Crew:** Do not exit until it's safe.

If you notice smoke or fire:

- 1. Exit Safely:** Cross arms over your chest and jump out with feet together. Do not touch the car and the ground at the same time.
- 2. Move Away:** Shuffle or bunny hop with feet together. Get as far away as you can.



Safe
Electricity.org

LET'S GO!

May 19-25 HerrinFesta Italiana HERRIN

An annual celebration rich in Italian heritage

June 5-6 International Horseradish Festival

COLLINSVILLE
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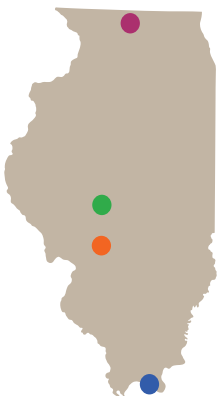
June 13 Annabelle Festival

ANNA
An annual community event featuring the Annabelle hydrangea

June 13-14 Salute to America 250

ROCK FALLS
A patriotic weekend celebrating America's heritage and service members

For more information, a complete listing of events or to submit an event, visit icl.coop/datebook.



International Carillon Festival

MAY
21-24

The 64th Annual International Carillon Festival returns Memorial Day weekend, bringing world-renowned carillonists from across the globe to Springfield. Presented by the Springfield Park District with support from The Rees Carillon Society and The Carillon Belles, the free, family-friendly event invites guests to enjoy picnic-style concerts on the lawn. All concerts run for about 45 minutes.

May 21-24, 2026: 6:30-9 p.m.

- Thomas Rees Memorial Carillon, 1740 W. Fayette Ave., Springfield
Admission: free
carillon-rees.org/event/carillon-festival

Rockford Peaches Playdate

MAY
23

Step back into the 1940s as the Women of the Rockford Peaches Living History League take the field at Midway Village. Gates open at 10 a.m. for a day filled with vintage baseball, family activities, museum access — including the Rockford Peaches exhibit — and special appearances from the International Women's Baseball Center. Fans are encouraged to dress in 1940s style, enjoy light concessions, explore historic memorabilia and catch the 1 p.m. game from the bleachers or their own lawn chairs.

May 23, 2026: 1-3 p.m.

- Midway Village Museum, 6799 Guilford Road, Rockford
Admission: varies
midwayvillage.com/rockford-peaches-midway.html



Superman Celebration

JUNE
12-14

The annual Metropolis Superman Celebration offers a fun, family-friendly weekend packed with a carnival, celebrity guests, and talented comic artists and authors. Visitors can enjoy interactive events like Superman Q&As, superhero contests, the Super Girl/Boy pageant, the Super Dog competition and a 5K Fun Run. It's an unforgettable experience for every Superman fan.

June 12-14, 2026: all day

- Downtown, 607 Market St., Metropolis
Admission: free
supermancelebration.net

Route 66 Tractor Drive

JUNE
20

Celebrate the 100th anniversary of Route 66 with a one-of-a-kind Tractor Drive. Dozens of tractors — from freshly polished classics to hardworking machines with decades of history — will roll out at 9:30 a.m. from the Litchfield Museum & Route 66 Welcome Center. The 35-mile drive will travel three historic alignments of the Mother Road. Hosted by the Mid-State Collectors Club, the event welcomes all brands of tractors. Bring your tractor — or come watch history roll by.

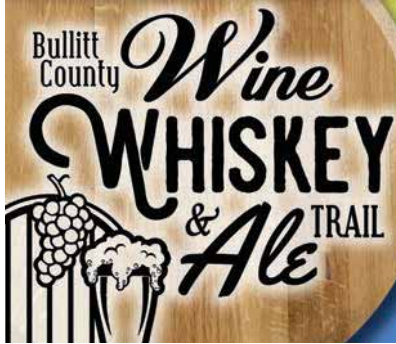
June 20, 2026: 9:30 a.m. start

- Litchfield Museum & Route 66 Welcome Center, 334 Old Route 66 N., Litchfield
Registration fee: \$10
Contact Jim Niemann at 217-324-5574 or Keith Ladage at 217-971-5917 for more information.



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MAY IS MENTAL HEALTH AWARENESS MONTH



Powering a safe journey

Electrical safety tips for RV camping

WHETHER YOU'RE HITTING THE road in the RV to enjoy a little time away, an extended trip at a favorite campground or seeing the sights of Route 66, as with all summer fun, being safe needs to be a priority.

Today's recreational vehicles (RVs) provide many of the comforts of home, such as microwaves, refrigerators and other small appliances. We can now vacation or "leisure" with more conveniences than ever, but we need to consider generator and electrical safety before hitting the road.

Generator safety

Although many people are aware that CO poisoning can occur in homes, they may not consider it can happen in any enclosed space, including a zipped tent or RV. Carbon monoxide (CO) is an odorless, colorless gas that is produced any time fuel is burned.

Along with generators, devices or appliances that produce CO include vehicles, small engines, grills, fireplaces, camping stoves, gas ranges and furnaces. CO can build up indoors or in any enclosed space, and it is poisonous.

Safe Electricity provides the following tips to keep in mind while enjoying your RV or other mobile digs, whether your generator was factory installed or you are using a portable one.

Inspect the exhaust system on the generator before using it and make sure it is in good working order. Do not operate a generator with a damaged exhaust system, or one that needs repairs or has other problems.

If you are using a portable generator, always make sure the exhaust is directed away from the camping area. Listen for problems (e.g., surging sound) when starting your generator, especially if it has been inactive for several weeks.

For that reason, run the generator at least once a week. This decreases moisture in the system and lubricates the engine seals and components to prevent carbon buildup. Properly maintain your generator, and be sure a CO detector is installed in your RV.

Electrical safety

When an RV frame is electrically charged, it is often referred to as "hot skin." Improper wiring or connection, no grounding, reversed polarity, and loose or worn outlets are just some of the potential causes. If a hot skin hazard exists, simply opening the door or coming into contact with the hitch can cause shock or electrocution.

To help prevent hot skin, your RV's electrical system needs to be regularly tested and maintained. A professional electrician can help

you make sure the wiring in your RV is safe. Perform a visual inspection of cords, plugs and outlets. If there are cracked or frayed cords or broken or discolored plugs or outlets, do not use them. Have them replaced or repaired. Fire extinguishers and fire detectors should also be on the checklist for safety precautions prior to traveling.

Always use electrical cords rated for the proper use. Make sure the power demand of the appliances that will be used does not exceed the cord's rating. To plug your RV into a campground power pedestal, you will need a heavy-duty, four-wire cord with a grounding wire, not an extension cord.

Whether you are powering your RV with a generator or with a campground hookup, you need to know the amperage your RV draws and the amperage available. If you try to draw more than is available, you can cause serious damage to the electrical source and your RV.

Before using a campground hookup, do a visual inspection of the area. If the hookup appears damaged, request another spot. Making the campground management aware of the damage will also help future campers at that site. In addition, never plug more than one RV into a single hookup.

For more information on electrical safety, visit SafeElectricity.org.



Erin Hollinshead is the executive director of Safe Electricity, a program creating a safer, smarter world by providing lifesaving electrical safety education.



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Smart appliance apps allow you to monitor energy use, remotely change settings and receive maintenance notifications.

Are smart appliances right for you?

Short answer: It depends

WHAT IS A SMART appliance? Simply put, it connects to the internet. Through Wi-Fi or Bluetooth, these appliances can be controlled using your smartphone, tablet or voice-assistant device. They're designed to optimize energy use and add convenience. Some smart devices can even learn your habits.

If you are wondering if smart appliances are right for your home, the answer depends on your preferences and the types of appliances you already own. Do you like the newest tech? Do you keep your phone within arm's reach? Do you enjoy the convenience of calling out commands to Alexa? Or do you prefer less technology or something in between? Personally, I'm in the middle.

Many smart appliances allow you to see how much energy each device consumes. That information can be helpful to better understand your energy habits and identify where energy may be going to waste.

Smart thermostats are a popular choice for managing energy use and reducing energy waste. Heating and cooling systems are typically a home's biggest sources of energy consumption. According to ENERGY STAR, you can save

an average of 8% on heating and cooling bills with a smart thermostat. Savings depend on climate, the type of HVAC system and how you use it.

Most energy savings from a smart thermostat come from automating temperature adjustments while you are sleeping or away from home. If you are already good at manually adjusting your thermostat, you likely won't see big savings, but you might prefer the convenience of a programmable device you can control on an app.

Smart thermostats make it much easier to program your heating and cooling schedule. Some have geofencing features that automatically adjust settings based on how far your phone is from home.

Coming in with the second-highest energy user in most homes is the water heater. I like the smart controls on my heat pump water heater. Also called a hybrid water heater, it uses heat pump technology to move heat instead of using energy to create heat. That makes it two to three times more efficient than a conventional water heater. You can save even more energy with smart heat pump water heaters.

I can monitor energy use, change settings and check how much hot water is available before I jump in the shower. The app notifies me when it's time to clean the air filter on top of the unit. I can access that information without having to go down to the basement. I can even set it to vacation mode after I've left the house for a trip. Not all heat pump water heaters have smart technology, so be sure to check before buying.

My refrigerator is a different story. I like the ability to monitor energy use, but it can be annoying when my phone notifies me that the door is open when I'm away at a conference. There are certain features that can only be controlled through the app, which I find frustrating.

Monitoring energy use and making it easier to control your household devices are benefits of smart appliances. Before upgrading, do your research to understand how the features work and whether they benefit your lifestyle. Smart technology can help lower your energy use. But, in some cases, you're better off improving your energy habits with the appliances already in your home. 💡



Miranda Boutelle is the director of operations and customer engagement at Efficiency Services Group in Oregon, a cooperatively owned energy efficiency company.

Limited Release!

Cache of 212 Complete Four Coin Sets of the Last Ike Silver Dollars

No coin brings back nostalgic memories like the Eisenhower Dollar. These hefty dollars bring back memories of walking to the drug store with your Grandpa Joe, hearing them jingle around in his pocket.



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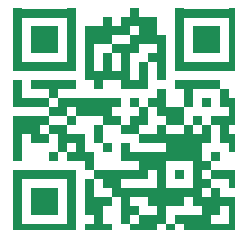


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The toll of scammers

Don't let them take you for a ride

MY PHONE BUZZED WITH a text message that informed me, quite urgently, that I owed money for an unpaid toll. Now, this would have been more concerning if I regularly drove through toll booths. But

Today's scams are polished, timely and often surprisingly believable.

Rural residents are not immune. In fact, scammers often assume that smaller communities are more trusting — because, frankly, we tend to be. We know our neighbors. We answer unknown numbers because it might be someone local. We don't assume every message is malicious.

Unfortunately, criminals understand that. The fake toll text is just one example. Others include package delivery notifications, account suspension warnings from banks, fraudulent emails that appear to come from the electric co-op, or even calls claiming to be from a grandchild in trouble.

What they all share is urgency. They want you to act before you think. They don't want you to call your bank to verify. They don't want you to type the company's website directly into your browser. They want you to click. Immediately.

One of the more convincing scams I've seen recently involved a "delivery failure" notice. It arrived during the holiday season — when many people expect packages. It referred to a tracking number. It included a logo. It even used polite, clear language. The only problem? I wasn't expecting anything.

Scammers are getting better because the tools they use are getting better. Artificial intelligence can now help generate convincing messages without obvious spelling errors. That means we can't rely on grammar mistakes as a red flag anymore.

So, what can we rely on? Slowing down. That may sound overly simple, but it's effective. If you receive a message that demands immediate payment, threatens penalties or pressures you to act quickly, pause and close the

message. Open your web browser and manually type the official website of the company in question, or call the number listed on your most recent statement. In nearly every case, you'll discover there was never a problem to begin with.

Electric cooperatives invest heavily in cybersecurity protections to defend systems and protect member data. But no organization — no matter how secure — can prevent someone from voluntarily clicking a malicious link. That's why personal awareness matters so much.

I tell people that cybersecurity today is less about firewalls and more about habits. Do you reuse the same password everywhere? Do you click links automatically? Do you assume that because something looks official, it must be? Scammers don't hack most people. They persuade them. And persuasion works best when we're distracted.

I think about this the same way I think about locking my doors at night. I don't live in fear. I don't assume danger is waiting outside. But I lock the door anyway — not because I expect trouble, but because it's a simple precaution. Digital life requires similar habits.

You don't need to be suspicious of everything. You don't need to stop answering your phone, but you do need to recognize that not every message deserves your trust. One practical suggestion: If you ever feel uncertain, ask someone else before acting. Sometimes a second set of eyes sees what we missed.

Delete that toll text message and remember that technology will keep advancing. Scams will keep evolving. But so will we. As long as we remember that urgency is often the first warning sign, we'll stay one step ahead. 💡



unless someone recently built one between my house and the local bait shop, it seemed unlikely.

Still, the message looked convincing. It had a logo. A reference number. A friendly but firm reminder that failure to pay could result in additional penalties. For just a split second, I did what most of us do. I considered clicking the link. That tiny moment of hesitation is exactly what scammers are counting on.

Online scams have evolved. The old days of poorly written emails from foreign princes promising millions of dollars are mostly gone.



Dan Gerard, CISSP, is the Chief Technology Officer for the Association of Illinois Electric Cooperatives in Springfield.

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100 YEARS of ROUTE 66



By Jim Winnerman

WHEN SOMEONE LIVES TO be 100, it's a time for celebration. The same is true for Historic Route 66, which this year celebrates a century of guiding travelers 300 miles starting in downtown Chicago and continuing through Illinois to St. Louis, and then traveling another 2,148 miles on to Los Angeles.

Over the decades the old road has been in use, it has had many historical milestones. When first dedicated on Nov. 26, 1926, Route 66 was 2,448 miles of paved and unpaved state roads, stitched together and renamed. Signs with the black-and-white U.S. 66 shield led motorists through the center of more than 200 towns, immediately earning the roadbed the title "The Main Street of America."

Slowly, the route was paved, with Illinois being the first state to complete the task in 1929. It would not be until 1938 that the entire length was surfaced.

In his 1939 novel "The Grapes of Wrath," John Steinbeck immortalized Route 66 with its second nickname — the "Mother Road" — describing it as the "road of flight" for people seeking work in California as they fled crop failures in the Midwest and the harsh reality of lost jobs during the Great Depression.

Then, during World War II, the route became a military necessity, serving as a vital strategic corridor for military convoys transporting troops and equipment.

In 1946, the song "Get Your Kicks on Route 66" was recorded by Nat King Cole, and later by 200 other artists. The popular lyrical travelogue kickstarted the most popular era of Route 66 and paved the way for tourism culture.

The beginning of the decline for the road came in 1956 with the signing of the Interstate Highway Act by President Dwight D. Eisenhower. As sections of Route 66 were replaced with interstates offering a faster travel alternative, the Mother Road fell out of favor.

On June 27, 1985, after almost 60 years of having been paved, repaved, rerouted and widened, Route 66 was officially removed from the U.S. Highway System. Decommissioned, the first long-distance highway theoretically no longer existed.



ILLUSTRATIONS COURTESY OF DAN ZETTWOCH

But, it had become known throughout the world, and the public remembered. Small businesses that served Route 66 travelers in Illinois and elsewhere and had survived to the end began to welcome a new type of traveler seeking attractions and experiences that had been the fabric of the history of the road.

The motels and restaurants were still there, awaiting a new generation who wanted to see, eat and sleep in authentic symbols of the past.

With an objective of raising awareness of the importance of the route in American history, Route 66 associations were organized in Illinois and each of the other seven states it passes through.

In 1999, the National Park Service Route 66 Corridor Preservation Program began to provide grants for buildings, road segments and cultural landscapes along the length of the corridor. "Historic Route 66" signs started to appear along Illinois interstates, guiding travelers to sections of the old route.

The result is that today U.S. Route 66 is no longer just a means to get to the West. At 100, new life has been added to the old pavement, and the road is once again an attraction.

As much as 80% of the old highway is still in use, and some of the small establishments that served travelers

are surprisingly still in business. Other businesses have opened that cater to the memory of the old highway, and in isolated places the scenery is not much different than when the road was commissioned 100 years ago.

All rekindle memories of the legendary road, and what a ride along its past was like. In effect, it has become a linear museum with independent curators.

Route 66 in Illinois today

While there are too many Route 66 attractions in Illinois to cover them all, here's a glimpse of what awaits discovery in the state.

The official Route 66 starting point (or end if traveling west to east) has long been at 122 S. Michigan Ave. in Chicago. There, a pylon with information about the start of the historic route and the first historic Route 66 sign appeared with the word underneath reading "BEGIN." However, on March 25, 2026, the city recognized Navy Pier as the starting point of the iconic roadway.

After leaving Chicago, The Route 66 Hall of Fame and Museum in Pontiac is home to thousands of items relating to the road. Operated by the Route 66 Association of Illinois, exhibits are devoted to the people and places in Illinois that contributed to the history of the road.

Illinois



Route 66 Start Sign
The official starting point at Adams Street and Michigan Avenue.

Wilmington's Gemini Giant
A beloved Muffler Man statue in South Island Park.



Lou Mitchell's
A classic breakfast spot known as the "first stop on the Mother Road."

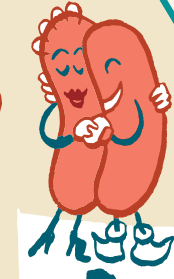
Chicago

Joliet

Wilmington

Pontiac

Bloomington



Springfield

Cozy Dog Drive In
Home of the original hot dog on a stick.

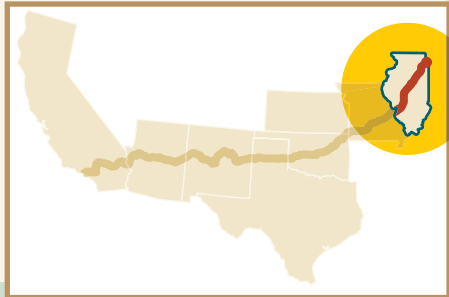
Edwardsville

Madison

Chain of Rocks Bridge
Historic mile-long Mississippi River footbridge with its famous bend.



Pontiac Route 66 Museum & Murals
Excellent museum plus many Instagram-worthy murals.



Places to go to learn more

Route 66 Hall of Fame & Museum in Pontiac, housed in a restored historic firehouse and city hall, features extensive memorabilia from Illinois towns along the route.

The **Joliet Area Historical Museum** doubles as the Official Route 66 Visitors Center for Illinois.

The **American Giants Museum** in Atlanta features the large fiberglass men and women spotted along Route 66.

The **Illinois State Fair Route 66 Experience** is located inside Gate 2 of the fairgrounds in Springfield and highlights Illinois businesses from Chicago to Chain of Rocks Bridge along the Mother Road.

The **Route History Museum** in Springfield offers a unique, immersive experience focused on Black history along Route 66. Included are exhibits on the Negro Motorist Green Book, an annual travel guide published from 1936 to 1964 providing Black

travelers with lodging, dining and other information necessary to stay safe and comfortable prior to the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

Litchfield Museum & Route 66 Welcome Center focuses on both local history and the legacy of Route 66 through a variety of exhibits, including Historic Route 66 artifacts and signage, displays about local businesses and personalities tied to the Mother Road, and more.



One exhibit is a school bus converted by Bob Waldmire into a mobile home. A Route 66 legend, Waldmire lived in the bus (and earlier in a VW van) from the late 1980s until his death in 2009, all the while creating meticulous drawings of sights he encountered along 66.

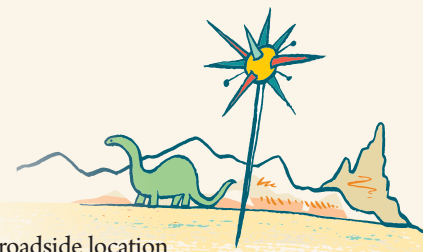
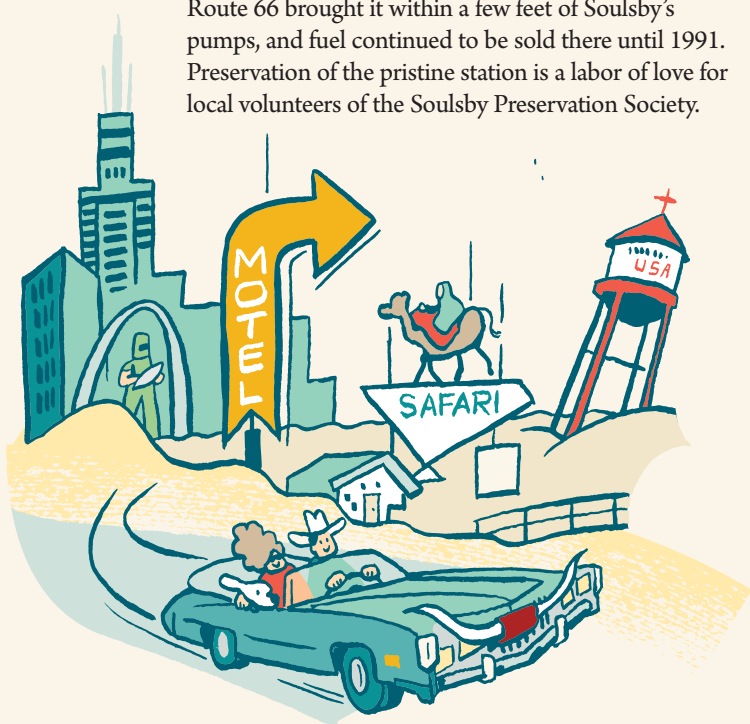
One attraction that originated before Route 66 has become an interesting stop since the road opened in 1928 — Funks Grove Pure Maple Sirup in Shirley. Although in business since 1891, the family-owned enterprise eventually grew to depend on the steady stream of customers that Route 66 brought to its door.

Another favorite stop for road trippers is the Cozy Dog Drive In in Springfield. Since the mid-1940s, the eatery has been serving hot dogs dipped in a cornbread-type batter and served on sticks. Laminated tabletops feature an annotated cartoon map of the road, and shelves of books contain Route 66 reading material for diners to borrow.

The Ariston Cafe in Litchfield holds the distinction of being one of the longest-operating restaurants along the legendary road. It is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Few classic roadside motels from the Route 66 era remain in Illinois, but for those seeking the experience of a bygone era of travel, the 1950s Carlin Villa Motel in Carlinville revives the nostalgic charm of the Golden Age of Route 66 with vintage furniture.

In Mount Olive, the canopy-style Soulsby Gas Station appears much like when gasoline was first pumped there in 1926. In 1931, a new alignment of Route 66 brought it within a few feet of Soulsby's pumps, and fuel continued to be sold there until 1991. Preservation of the pristine station is a labor of love for local volunteers of the Soulsby Preservation Society.



Quirky 66 attractions

Some towns capitalize on their roadside location with attractions that have no actual relationship with the Mother Road. In Lincoln, a 40-foot-long wagon, officially named “Railsplitter,” was built by David Bentley to commemorate the 75th birthday of Route 66 in 2001. Measuring 25 feet tall and 40 feet long, the landmark is recognized by the Guinness Book of World Records as the World’s Largest Covered Wagon.

Near Auburn, the last hand-laid brick surface of the road remains. Finished in 1931, the 1.4-mile preserved segment can still be traversed by automobile.

The Pink Elephant Antique Mall in Livingston features a myriad of attractions that capture the character long associated with the Mother Road, that of using innovation and quirky approaches to entice travelers to stop. While the antique mall is where people shop, in front of the store it is the life-size pink elephant, an original 1960s Futuro House shaped like a UFO, and an ice cream shop shaped like an ice cream cone that are the backdrops for photos.

Wilmington proudly displays The Gemini Giant, a 30-foot tall, helmeted astronaut dressed in a green jumpsuit holding a silver rocket that was the mascot of several businesses in town along 66 beginning in 1960. Today it has been preserved and can be seen in Wilmington’s South Island Park.

The Brooks Catsup Bottle water tower on the south side of Collinsville is claimed to be the largest catsup bottle in the world at 70 feet tall, perched atop a 100-foot stand and having a 100,000-gallon capacity (theoretically 640,000 bottles of catsup). Although not erected as a Route 66 attraction, it is an example of mid-20th-century novelty architecture and is a popular stop for those en route to California.

A surprise ending

For decades, the end of Route 66 in Illinois held one last surprise for unsuspecting travelers motoring their way into Missouri. Driving over the Chain of Rocks Bridge connecting the two states, they would encounter an unusual 30-degree turn in the middle of the bridge high over the Mississippi River.

Today, the mile-long, 24-foot-wide span welcomes bicycles and pedestrians instead of cars and contains placards about the history of the bridge and Route 66.

For a list of events celebrating the 100th anniversary of Route 66 through the end of 2026, visit illinoisroute66.org/il66centennial. 💡

BEYOND ILLINOIS

DON'T MISS THESE STOPS ALONG ROUTE 66

By Jim McCarty

ROUTE 66 WINDS THROUGH eight states from Illinois to California. Here's a list of some of the top attractions for the rest of the states.

Missouri

- **Ted Drewes Frozen Custard, St. Louis** — A Mother Road staple served upside down since 1929.
- **Route 66 State Park, Eureka** — The public recreation area located on the Meramec River at the site of the former, vanished town of Times Beach.
- **Meramec Caverns, Stanton** — A road-trip classic since the 1930s. Billboards and barn roof signs for these caverns once lined the entire Mother Road, and the attraction still feels like pure Americana.
- **Bourbon Water Tower, Bourbon** — Arguably the best selfie stop on Route 66, the town's water tower is one of the most photographed and shared sites on the road.

Kansas

- **Cars on the Route, Galena** — Kansas has only 13 miles of Route 66, but this restored Kan-O-Tex gas station — home to the truck that inspired "Mater" in Cars — is a standout.
- **Rainbow Bridge, Riverton** — The last remaining Marsh Arch bridge on Route 66.
- **Baxter Springs Independent Oil & Gas Station, Baxter Springs** — Beautifully restored early gas station with great history.

Oklahoma

- **Blue Whale, Catoosa** — This giant, smiling blue whale beside a pond is one of Route 66's most beloved and quirky landmarks.
- **Arcadia Round Barn, Arcadia** — Rare round barn built in 1898, lovingly restored.
- **Oklahoma Route 66 Museum, Clinton** — The best museum for understanding the Mother Road's full story.
- **National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum, Oklahoma City** — The premier destination for western history, art and culture.
- **POPS 66, Arcadia** — Giant soda bottle and 700-plus sodas to choose from.



ILLUSTRATIONS COURTESY OF DAN ZETTWOCH

Texas

- **Cadillac Ranch, Amarillo** — Ten Cadillacs nose-down in the desert, covered in spray paint — and you're encouraged to add your own. Irreplaceable Route 66 kitsch.
- **Midpoint Cafe, Adrian** — Exactly halfway between Chicago and Santa Monica. Great pie.
- **The Big Texan Steak Ranch, Amarillo** — Over-the-top Texas fun; home of the 72-ounce steak challenge.
- **U-Drop Inn, Shamrock** — Sit where Elvis did in this classic diner.

New Mexico

- **Blue Swallow Motel, Tucumcari** — The best neon on the entire route. Family-run, beautifully preserved rooms, and a true 1940s motor court experience. Even if you don't stay, stop for photos.
- **Albuquerque Central Avenue Neon Corridor, Albuquerque** — Vintage motels, diners and neon signs for miles.
- **El Rancho Hotel, Gallup** — Hollywood's western movie stars stayed here; gorgeous lobby.

Arizona

- **Petrified Forest and Painted Desert, Holbrook** — The only national park the Mother Road drives straight through. Classic roadside nostalgia meets staggering natural beauty.
- **Wigwam Motel, Holbrook** — "Sleep in a Wigwam!" An unforgettable overnight.
- **Oatman Ghost Town, Oatman** — Wild burros, gunfighter shows and a mountain drive you'll never forget.
- **Standin' on the Corner Park, Winslow** — Eagles' musical tribute made real.
- **Meteor Crater National Landmark, Winslow** — Enormous, well-preserved impact site.

California

- **Roy's Motel and Cafe, Amboy** — A surreal desert time capsule with a legendary Googie-style neon sign. Nothing captures the lonely, romantic final stretch of Route 66 like Roy's.
- **Bottle Tree Ranch, Oro Grande** — Elmer Long's mesmerizing forest of metal and glass sculptures.
- **Bagdad Cafe, Newberry Springs** — Filming location with cult status.
- **Wigwam Motel, San Bernardino** — Another iconic "wigwam village." 📍



For our full list of Route 66 attractions beyond Illinois visit icl.coop/rt66.

Sirup, not syrup

Funks Grove, a sweet stop on 66

By Kayla Adkins

AMONG THE TREES OF Shirley, there is a quiet detour that's like stepping back in time. A narrow road leads into a grove of sugar maple trees — and at its heart sits an unexpected destination along Route 66 — Funks Grove Pure Maple Sirup. Yes, sirup, not syrup.

The air smells faintly sweet in late winter and early spring when the sap begins to flow. The trees tower overhead; some are descendants of the very maples tapped there nearly two centuries ago. Inside the shop, shelves are lined with glass bottles filled with amber liquid. This is not mass production. This is a story that began in 1824.

That was when Isaac Funk arrived on the Illinois frontier and settled this patch of land, long before highways and road trips defined the American landscape. The grove of sugar maples would prove invaluable. Like many early settlers, the Funk family learned to harvest sap and boil it down into a sweetener. Sugar was scarce on the frontier, but here, nature provided.

Still today it provides. Debby Funk says, "It takes about 40 years for the trees to get big enough to tap. They were not planted to service, but naturally there."

For decades, the family made maple sirup only for themselves — iron kettles hanging over open fires and long days spent gathering sap by hand. It was hard work. By 1891, a descendant named Arthur Funk saw potential beyond the homestead. He built a small sugarhouse and began producing maple sirup commercially, selling it to travelers and neighbors.

As Route 66 became one of America's most iconic roads, Funks Grove found itself perfectly positioned to greet the steady stream of travelers, who were attracted to the hand-painted signs advertising pure maple sirup. That tradition has not slowed down.

Inside the shop, shelves are lined with more than just bottles of sirup. There are maple candies, spreads and seasonal treats alongside Route 66 memorabilia.

Over the years, the family has focused on purity, quality and respect for the land. That respect is rooted in the grove



Funks Grove, a popular Route 66 stop, has been selling its famous maple sirup since the 1800s.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF FUNKS GROVE PURE MAPLE SIRUP

itself. At one point, the construction of Interstate 55 threatened to cut straight through the trees. It would have been the end of everything, but the Funk family fought to protect their land — and won. The highway was rerouted, preserving not just a business, but a living piece of history.

Today, Funks Grove is still family-run. Mike Funk is the fifth generation. He and his wife Debby can be found selling goodies in the store. Their son Jonathan is also a part of the endeavor, representing the sixth. Newer ventures, like their expansion into the Kirby Family Creamery and Funks Grove Heritage Fruits and Grains are natural extensions of the story rather than a departure. As the family grows, so does the business.

Then there's the name. Sirup isn't a gimmick. It's a deliberate nod to an older definition of the word, used to distinguish pure maple from imitations. In a world where "maple-flavored" often replaces the real thing, that spelling difference carries a lot of weight.

In addition to the sirup, visits to Funks Grove also provide an experience, including tours that showcase sap to sirup production. So, next time you're traveling down I-55 through central Illinois — take the exit. Follow the signs for a bottle of maple sirup. 💡

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Small business owners can request to be featured in the Support Local section of Illinois Country Living magazine by submitting the form at icl.coop/local.

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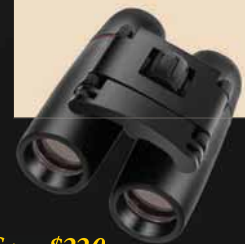
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A sweet slice of Americana on the Mother Road

Ariston Cafe's legacy lives on

By Lisa Cherry

KNOWN FOR ITS LOCATION, longevity and desserts, the Ariston Cafe in Litchfield is one of the oldest continuously operated restaurants on Route 66. Since 1935, people from around the globe have crossed its threshold to enjoy a meal with a side of Mother Road magic.

Founded by Greek immigrant Pete Adam in 1924, the restaurant was originally situated on Route 4 in Carlinville. It was five years later that the business moved to Litchfield, followed by its current spot (also in Litchfield) on Route 66 in 1935. Decades later, in 1992, the cafe and the Adam family were inducted into the Route 66 Hall of Fame. In May 2006, the Ariston was listed in the National Register of Historic Places by the state of Illinois and the National Park Service.

Adam's son Nick and his wife Demi took the reins in 1966, carrying on the family-owned-and-operated business. It wasn't until 2018 that they retired, and the well-known establishment's ownership changed hands — this time to Will and Michele Law and Marty and Kara Steffens, who together also own Maverick Steaks & Spirits in Litchfield.

"Other than the Ariston, [it's] probably the second longest run establishment in town. So, we knew Nick and Demi really well," says Will.

According to him, in the old days the Ariston was more of a place for special occasions like anniversaries, while he and his partners have transitioned it to a more family-friendly atmosphere. One thing that remains the same, however, is the sheer number of international travelers they see each year.

"We, at a minimum, entertain 15 to 20,000 European travelers every summer," Will says, before describing an unexpected visit one day when the restaurant was closed. "I hear a rumble in the parking lot. It was like, 50, 55 Harley Davidsons. ... They're all Germans, all from Berlin. They had a list ... and [Ariston] was on it. It still baffles me that somebody halfway across the world had 15 things they wanted to do, and you're number six."

He admits the language barrier can be challenging but says proudly that his staff is up to the task. "They're impeccable,

The Ariston Cafe's famous dessert tray





Above: Ariston's current building

Top right: Restaurant staff members pose with co-owner Will Law (far right) behind the restaurant's historic counter.

Lower left: Mostaccioli

Lower right: The Ariston Pork Tenderloin



a good, young group, [along with] a handful of old timers — they help train the younger ones," says Will. "They have fun. They enjoy the tourists and entertain them."

During the winter, it's the locals who keep the restaurant afloat. "When I say local, I'm talking surrounding Illinois, Missouri, Iowa," Will laughs. "You hear those stories, [like] this is where we got engaged. This is where the wedding proposal took place. ... It's all the time. Fiftieth wedding anniversaries, I thought were very rare, right? I see that two, three times a week."

There's perhaps another draw for locals and travelers alike: The bill of fare remains much the same. Will says he and his partners haven't really touched the menu they inherited. "Most all of the recipes they started with, we still use today," he explains. "Spaghetti sauce, the chili, all the salad dressings, all the salads, all the soups — everything is homemade. Those are the original recipes from the previous owners."

It's a lengthy menu — there's Italian, Southern, seafood, Mexican and American. "[What] they put together kind of encompasses everyone," Will adds, laughing that managing that amount of variety is sometimes difficult. "That's the way it's been forever, so you just kind of figure it out."

Popular orders include prime rib, fried chicken and fried cod, and the restaurant serves up 30 pounds of chicken livers a week. And then there's the dessert tray — the Ariston is known for it.

"Desserts are probably what really bring most people in," says Will. "I would say about 98% of people who walk through that door, they're getting dessert. ... Some patrons will come in, order lunch [and] automatically shove it off to the side. [We] box it to go, and they eat their dessert. I don't think I've ever worked in a restaurant where dessert was so revered."

The decision the partners made to purchase the Ariston was driven by their desire to preserve its legacy. "We just wanted to keep it the same," he says. That turned out to be a good idea, which both couples learned early on when tackling their first major project after assuming ownership.

They had decided to refurbish the building's well-known — and apparently much loved — exterior neon. "Day one, the neon's down, and the signs are down ... and people are [like], 'What are you guys doing? You can't destroy history,'" says Will. "We had to actually take out an article in the paper to tell people [we weren't]."

The neon isn't the only important piece of the restaurant's physical history. There are also the Anheuser Busch sign, the counter, the booths and tables in the original section of the building — all contribute to the overall experience.

So, the next time wanderlust — or your appetite — calls, hop on Old Route 66 and travel back in time to the Ariston Cafe. Just make sure to save room for dessert. 📍

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The all-American hot dog

WHEN I THINK OF Route 66, I think of something that is quintessentially American. When it comes to recipes that go along with the Mother Road and classic Americana, I think of apple pie, hamburgers and, of course, hot dogs. Then I wondered what kind of hot dogs people could discover while traveling the eight states from Chicago to Los Angeles, and I found the following recipes along the way. 

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Please email recipe submissions or questions to finestcooking@icl.coop or mail them to Finest Cooking c/o Illinois Country Living, 6460 S. 6th St. Frontage Road East, Springfield, IL 62712. Please include your name, address, phone number (for questions), and the name of your electric cooperative. Additional recipes can be found on our website at finestcooking.com.



Recipes are prepared, tasted and photographed by **Colten Bradford**, Illinois Country Living editor.



Coney Dog

There are strong Coney Dog traditions in Tulsa, Okla., the Midwest and other locations along Route 66.

Serves: 6

- | | |
|-----------------------------------|---------------------|
| 1 pound ground beef | 2 cups water |
| 1 onion, finely diced and divided | Salt, to taste |
| 2 tablespoons tomato paste | 6 all-beef hot dogs |
| 2 teaspoons chili powder | 6 buns |
| 1 teaspoon paprika | Yellow mustard |
| 1 teaspoon cumin | |

In a pan over medium heat, brown beef and break up until crumbly. Drain fat. Add 1/2 cup diced onion, tomato paste, chili powder, paprika, cumin and water to the beef and simmer for 20 minutes, until thickened. Add salt, to taste. Grill or boil hot dogs. Place dog in bun, top with coney sauce, onions and mustard.

Chicago-Style Hot Dog

Start a Route 66 journey with the Windy City classic and use absolutely no ketchup.

Servings: 6

- | | |
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| 6 all-beef hot dogs | 2 Roma tomatoes, cut into wedges |
| 6 poppy-seed buns | 1 jar dill pickle spears |
| Yellow mustard | 1 jar sport peppers |
| 1 jar neon green sweet relish | Celery salt |
| 1 white onion, chopped | |

Steam or simmer hot dogs in boiling water. Lightly steam the buns. Assemble by placing a hot dog in a bun. On one side of the hot dog, add a generous line of mustard and top with a pickle spear. On the other side, add onion and relish. Top with two tomato wedges and two sport peppers. Sprinkle celery salt over the top and serve. **Editor's note:** The neon green relish is hard to find, but can be ordered online. Or, buy sweet relish and add food coloring. The color won't be perfect, but it will taste the same.



Sonoran Dog

A classic Southwest hot dog popularized in Arizona. If it's messy, you did it right.
Servings: 6

- | | |
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| 6 all-beef hot dogs | 1 white onion, chopped |
| 6 strips bacon | Mustard |
| 6 bolillo rolls or soft buns | Salsa |
| 1 15-ounce can pinto beans | Mayo |
| 1 large tomato, diced | |

Wrap dogs in bacon. Grill until bacon is crisp. Warm the buns. Place 2 tablespoons of beans in the bun first. Add the bacon-wrapped dog. Top with tomato, salsa, onion, mustard and mayo.

L.A. Street Dog

A late-night legend, also known as the L.A. Danger Dog, found sold on the streets and outside stadiums and concerts in Los Angeles.
Servings: 6

- | | |
|------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| 6 all-beef hot dogs | 1 green bell pepper, julienned |
| 6 strips bacon | Ketchup |
| 6 buns | Mustard |
| 1 large yellow onion, sliced | Mayo |

Wrap dogs in bacon. Cook in a nonstick skillet over medium heat until bacon is crisp. Saute onions and peppers in the bacon drippings. Toast buns lightly. Add dog, sauteed vegetables and condiments. Serve in foil.

Corn Dogs

While it's called a Cozy Dog when driving through Springfield, this hot dog on a stick is a popular treat along Route 66, as well as at fairs and sporting events.
Adapted from natashaskitchen.com
Servings: 12

- | | |
|---------------------------------|---------------------------|
| 1 quart vegetable oil | 1/8 teaspoon black pepper |
| 1-1/2 cups fine yellow cornmeal | 1-3/4 cups buttermilk |
| 1-1/4 cups all-purpose flour | 1 egg |
| 1/4 cup granulated sugar | 12 hot dogs |
| 1 tablespoon baking powder | 12 wooden skewers |
| 1/4 teaspoon salt | |

Pour 3 inches of oil into a large pot and heat to 340 F over medium heat. Whisk together cornmeal, flour, sugar, baking powder, salt and pepper. Separately, whisk together buttermilk and egg. Combine wet and dry ingredients and pour into a tall glass. Pat hot dogs dry with paper towels and insert a stick into each. Dip hot dogs in the batter to coat. Let excess drip off. Using tongs, carefully hold the corn dog by the stick and submerge it in the hot oil for a few seconds to let it seal so it doesn't stick to the bottom of the pot, and drop it in the oil. Fry in batches (2 to 3 at a time) for 3 minutes or until browned. Drain on paper towels.



Berry bliss

Grow your own strawberries

IF YOU HAVE ALREADY enjoyed a sweet, juicy strawberry this spring, it was likely grown in a warmer climate and shipped to your local grocery store. While store-bought berries offer convenience, there is something special about picking your own sun-ripened strawberries straight from the garden. The good news: Growing strawberries at home is not only rewarding but also simple, making them an ideal choice for gardeners of all experience levels.

While wild strawberries have been enjoyed around the world since ancient times, they were first cultivated in Europe in the early 1300s. Thanks to centuries of selective breeding, today's gardeners can enjoy the large, flavorful strawberries available throughout the year.

If you are adding strawberries to your garden, plant them between April and May. This timing gives the plants a chance to develop strong root systems and become established before hot, dry summer weather arrives. Strawberries are remarkably versatile and thrive in containers, raised beds and in-ground rows.

Careful selection of a planting site is essential for successfully growing strawberries. These

plants thrive in full sun, needing at least six hours of direct sunlight each day, along with about 1 inch of water per week during active growth. Strawberries grow best in well-drained soil rich in organic matter and prefer a slightly acidic pH of around 6.0.

For the strongest plants and maximum future production, remove all flowers during the first summer. This helps direct energy into root and runner development rather than fruiting. When choosing a location, avoid areas where tomatoes, peppers, eggplants or potatoes have recently grown, as these crops can harbor verticillium wilt, a soil-borne disease that can infect strawberries.

Consider planting the following three types of strawberries in your garden.

June-bearing strawberries bloom in spring and produce a single, heavy crop of fruit over a 2- to 3-week period in June — just as their name suggests. They typically yield the largest quantity and size of berries within that brief period. Plant them 18 to 24 inches apart in rows spaced 4 feet apart.

Day-neutral strawberries flower and fruit continuously throughout the growing season, producing a supply of berries from

late spring through fall. Although the fruit is smaller than the June-bearing varieties, it is known for its excellent flavor. Space plants 12 inches apart in rows that are 12 inches apart.

Everbearing strawberries produce two main crops, one in late spring and another in early fall. These plants usually bear smaller fruit and fewer runners, making them a great option for gardeners with limited space. Like day-neutral types, plant them 12 inches apart in rows that are 12 inches apart.

When selecting strawberry plants, opt for disease-resistant cultivars to help reduce the need for pesticides. Varieties differ in fruit size, flavor, disease resistance, cold hardiness and harvest timing. Since the three types look similar in foliage, it is important to confirm the variety by checking the labels before making a purchase.

Note that strawberry plants will not produce forever. They usually start declining in productivity after 2 to 3 years. New plantings can be added every few years to guarantee continuous production. With a bit of seasonal care, you can enjoy picking these sweet red gems every year. 💡



Brittnay Haag is a Horticulture Educator for the University of Illinois Extension serving Livingston, McLean and Woodford counties. Her work focuses on youth horticulture education through school gardens and Jr. Master Gardener programs.



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